

CRUCIAL NEW TESTAMENT MISTRANSLATIONS

An Examination of Word-Study Failures

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Part I: An Examination of Luke's Gospel

Textual Study 1: LUKE 16:16 (cf. Mt 11:12)

Is everyone forcing their way into the Kingdom?

Current Problematic Rendering:

¹⁶The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it" (NIV).

Suggested Improved Rendering:

¹⁶The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached. All kinds of people are inflicting violence against it."

Analysis

All the major translations from the KJV to the TNIV, NLT, and ESV, as well as most of the renderings of individual translators, parallel the NAS and NIV: "**The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it**" (NIV). The NET Bible and the HCSB try to soften the force of *biazomai* by seeing it as a passive: "**Everyone is (strongly, HCSB) urged to enter it.**" Only Williams takes it in any hostile sense, although with some ambiguity: "**Everybody has been taking it by storm.**"

1. ***The problem.*** Most commentators have struggled to make any sense out of this text. It has never been true at any point in history that a majority of people have been eager to get into the kingdom of God. Certainly at that point in time, just a matter of weeks before Christ's crucifixion, mobs were not eager to press into the kingdom. Perhaps in the earlier years of His ministry, during the 'Great Galilean Ministry,' this might have made some sense. Yet even after Pentecost, out of the millions in Israel, only a few thousand responded to the witness of the apostles. In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord was very explicit: "**For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it**" (Mt. 7:14). After the bread of life discourse, many of Christ's disciples abandoned him, which elicited the question to the Twelve, "**You do not want to go away also, do you?**" Not too long before the Luke 16 context, Luke records the Lord Jesus as saying, "**Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom**" (Lk. 12:32). Even closer in context, when someone asked him, "**Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?**" he responded, "**Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able**" (Lk. 13:23-4). None of these words of the Lord are at all harmonious with the usual translation of Luke 16:16. Did the Lord Jesus contradict Himself?

Just as significant is the total lack of an analogy of Scripture for the absurd idea of anyone being able to force his way into the kingdom of God. Biblically speaking, this is an “off the wall” notion! It is certainly contrary to salvation by grace through faith alone. Although we are exhorted to seek God, to repent and believe the good news, the idea of people being able to crash their way forcibly into the kingdom has absolutely no biblical parallel. It would involve the worst kind of Pelagianism in being totally contrary to John 1:12-13 and all of Paul’s grace emphasis. We shall show that the linguistic data is also totally unsupportive of such an idea.

Therefore, a few commentators as far back as J. J. Van Osterzee (1861) have seen it in a totally hostile active sense, that everyone is inflicting violence against the kingdom of God:

We cannot agree with the common view that here the impulse of enthusiastic interest and the impetuous longing to press into the kingdom of God is indicated. The connection, vss. 14, 15, appears to lead us rather to the thought that it is here a hostile assault that is spoken of, in which the inward malice of the heart reveals itself. . . . The Saviour will then say: How hostilely ye are disposed toward a kingdom of God, which (vs. 16) was announced by the law and the prophets, yet the law’s demands and threatenings hold continually good in undiminished force (an example, vs. 18), and ye will, therefore, not escape the judgment of God, who knows your hearts, vs. 15.1

More recently Ben Witherington references Schlosser to say that both the Lukan and Matthean contexts “suggest that the violence being done to John and Jesus as proclaimers of God’s new activity is in fact violence against God’s reign.”² The Lukan context, the parallel with Matthew 11:12, the meaning of *biazomai*, and a vital overlooked linguistic clue totally support their conclusions. Yet not one translation surfaced which renders it in this way. I would propose that it should be rendered: “All kinds of people are inflicting violence against it [the kingdom of God].”

2. A key linguistic clue. The root of the problem is the usage of *eis*, which has been totally missed by both commentators and translators alike. All assume that the preposition *eis* has its usual connotation, ‘into.’ However, Dana and Mantey list remote meanings, including “(3) against” and reference Lk. 12:10; 15:18, and Acts 6:11. Since these are also from Luke, this bore further investigation. Wallace lists “7. Disadvantage: against,” and BDF say that *eis* is also used for *epi* and *pros*. The BAG lexicon is more explicit in giving a fourth meaning, “to indicate the goal” and under this heading says “in a hostile sense” and gives extensive support.³ But it is A. Oepke in *TDNT* who fully spells it out: “2. *Eis* denotes relationship in a personal sense. Enmity is directed a. against God, the Son of Man, the Spirit, the emissaries of institutions of God, in the form of sin. . . . b. It is also directed against men. The NT warns us especially of the hostility of persecutors against the disciples of Jesus.”⁴ From these linguistic tools we find that there are nineteen other hostile usages of *eis* in the New Testament in the sense of ‘against’, twelve of which are found in the writings of Luke (Lk 12:10, do; 15:18, 21; 17:3,4; 22:65; Acts 6:11; 9:1; 23:30; 25:8, do), and three in Paul. Additionally, the BAG lexicon lists three such references in the papyri and six in the writers of antiquity.⁵ Therefore, serious consideration must be given to this usage of *biazetai eis* in Luke 16:16. Consequently, Schrenk, along with a majority of commentators, errs in saying: “. . . *biazesthai eis* does not mean ‘to exert force against’ because *pros* or *epi* would be used.”⁶ He was obviously naive of the substantial hostile use of *eis* in Luke and other ancient sources.

3. The usage of *biazomai*. We must also consider the meaning of *biazomai*. The BAG lexicon first lists “1. trans. *inflict violence on w. acc.*” and gives six Koine and Septuagintal references. Then

¹ J. J. Van Osterzee, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 2nd German ed. (1861), trans. Charles C. Starbuck (1866).

² Ben Witherington, III, in *DJG*, p. 388.

³ H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (NY: Macmillan, 1927), p. 103; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, (Zondervan, 1996), p. 369; BDF, p. 112; BAG, p. 228.

⁴ A. Oepke in *TDNT*, II:431-2.

⁵ BAG, p. 228.

⁶ G. Schrenk in *TDNT*, I: 316.

they list: “1. trans. pass.– a. in a bad sense *be violently treated, be oppressed*” and give four ancient references. Under this they list: “through hindrances raised against it” and reference Josephus and four early versions in support.⁷ Schrenk in *TDNT* confirms this: “*Biazomai* always denotes a forced as distinct from a voluntary act.” He says that the middle usually has the sense to force, to compel, to overpower (sometimes militarily and sometimes sexually) and concludes: “In the rich use in relation to military action, maltreatment, compulsion of various kinds, and even religious constraint, we can see clearly this basic sense of the exercise of hostile force.”⁸ This predominant extra-biblical usage must be given primary consideration in the translation of both Luke 16:16 and in Matthew 11:12. The hostile sense of ‘against’ for *eis* accords with the hostile sense of *biazomai* in Luke to provide an easy solution to the enigma. It is doubtful that the meaning of *biazomai* can be softened from ‘to be violent against’ to ‘to force.’ It is “hostile force.” Thus we must render it: “. . . inflicting violence against it [the kingdom of God].”

4. The Matthean parallel. Additionally, we must consider the parallel with Matthew. Although these are two distinct contexts two years apart, the use of *biazomai*, *biaste#s*, and the reference to the Pharisees’ opposition, connects them in thought. The first clause of Matthew 11:12 has been correctly rendered in a hostile sense in about half of the translations: “**The kingdom of heaven has suffered violence**” (so KJV, TNIV, ESV, HCSB, NAS, RSV, NRSV, Weymouth, and Beck). Many others take it in a positive sense, with questionable support: “**The kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing.**” Most translations, however, render the second clause like the KJV: “**Violent men take it by force.**” Only the NIV rendered both clauses positively: “**The kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.**” The NLT alone renders the first clause positively and the second hostilely: “**The kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and violent people attack it.**” The TNIV has now correctly come to hold both clauses negatively: “**The kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it.**” There is a serious problem in taking these two clauses in opposite senses since there is no adversative.

The marked shift from the NIV doubly positive rendering to the TNIV doubly hostile rendering is well supported by the context. In the extended discourse attending the sending out of the twelve apostles in Matthew 10, the Lord Jesus emphasizes the persecution and even martyrdom which will attend the proclamation of the kingdom until the end of the age. Then we see John the Baptizer having doubts in prison because the Lord is not bringing in the mediatorial kingdom which he himself had announced. Christ knows that John is about to be subjected to the ultimate violence of being beheaded. The immediately following context is the Lord’s rebuke of the cities in which much of his ministry focused because of their lack of repentance. By Matthew 12:14 the Pharisees are conspiring how they might destroy the Lord Jesus.

Additionally, the primary force of *harpazein* is hostile as BAG attests: “1. *Steal, carry off, drag away* (so mostly LXX; Enoch, 102, 9). . . . 2. *snatch or take away*—a. forcefully. . . .”⁹ Foerster in *TDNT* comments: “In the NT the word is used in parables which speak of the conflict between the kingdom of God and that of Satan,” and references Jn. 10:12, 28, 29; Mt. 12:29; 23:13.¹⁰ Although D. A. Carson take the first clause positively, he sees the second as an evil attack based upon his admission that *biastēs* must be rendered ‘violent men’ and that “*harpazousin* . . . almost always has the same evil connotations.” He documents E. Moore, C. Spicq, and many others in support.¹¹

Thus a number of writers have opted for a hostile meaning in both clauses of the Matthean passage. G. Schrenk in *TDNT* states, “Since the reference (→ *biaste#s*) is obviously to a powerful hostile action, it seems better to seek an explanation which will better harmonize the two parts of the saying.” Later he concludes: “We are thus brought f. to the pass. interpretation in *malam partem*

⁷ BAG, p. 140.

⁸ Schrenk, I:609.

⁹ BAG, p. 108.

¹⁰ W. Foerster in *TDNT*, I:472-4.

¹¹ D. A. Carson, *Matthew in Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 1984), 8:265-8.

which refers *biazesthai* to the enemies of divine rule, i.e., that it is contested, attacked, or hampered by contentious opponents.” He gives three reasons: 1) linguistic parallels, 2) both clauses must agree, and 3) Matthew’s only other use of *harpazein* in 13:19, where the evil one snatches the seed, and also Mt. 23:13. “The strongly negative tone of the utterance is striking.”¹² A. C. Gaebelein had perceptively explained:

The forerunner, John was violently rejected by the Pharisees. This foreshadowed the rejection of the King, the rejection of the preaching of the Kingdom and the Kingdom itself. In this seizing upon the Kingdom, rejecting it, the Kingdom of the Heavens suffered violence. It was rejected by force and now is postponed till He comes again.¹³

Robert Gundry agrees:

. . . portrayal of John as a prototype of persecuted Christians. . . and see 17:9-13, where Matthew portrays John and Jesus as partners in suffering. . . Thus Matthew sticks to the original sense, which fits his emphasis upon persecution: “and violent [men] plunder it.” In agreement with the pejorative connotation of *harpazousin*, the plundering of the kingdom represents the persecution of its members, e.g., the imprisonment of John the Baptist.¹⁴

John Walvoord and Dwight Pentecost also took this view.¹⁵ G. Braumann in *NIDNTT* confirms: “The best interpretation, therefore, is the one which takes *biazesthai* as passive in an unfavorable sense: the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men assault it. . . .”¹⁶

5. Recognizing the connection. Since the evidence that both clauses of Matthew 11:12 should be taken in a hostile sense is so impressive, why have none of the translators been willing to see the Lukan passage in the same light? Some commentators and translators seem to feel that the context of the Lukan passage is too different to justify connecting the meanings of the two passages despite the linguistic connections. However, since the Lukan context is part of his travelogue to Jerusalem and comes after five or six explicit predictions of and just a matter of weeks before Christ’s own passion, we must seriously consider his violent crucifixion to be the hostility against the kingdom he is referring to.¹⁷ The translators also seem to be naive of the hostile Lukan usage of *eis*, since the presence of the preposition in Luke is a major difference between the two passages. It is also possible that some theological or worldview bias may have entered into the thinking of some of the translators. A postmillennial rosy optimism about the course of this present evil age (Gal. 1:4) and a tendency of some commentators to make a connection with the use of force in Luke 14:23 may have influenced some. Remember that Augustine first misinterpreted that parable to justify the use of physical force in reference to the Donatists, which tragically became a justifying basis for the Inquisition. It is astonishing that some commentators reference Luke 14:23 in this connection! In any case coercion to faith has nothing to do with people forcing their way into the kingdom.

6. The force of *pas*. Having resolved the major problem with the translations, another serious problem remains. Simple observation tells us that neither is everyone trying to press into the kingdom, nor is everyone perpetrating violence against the kingdom. The solution is in the BAG lexicon in delineating the many usages of *pas*. For the adjectival use of *pas* with a noun in the singular without an article, they list “every kind of, all sorts of, for the words *pantodapos* and *pantoios*, which are lacking in our lit.”¹⁸ This seems like a straightforward solution, that the Lord is

¹² Schrenk, I:609-11.

¹³ A. C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NY: Loizeaux, 1961), p. 226.

¹⁴ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art* (Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 209-10.

¹⁵ John F. Walvoord, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), p. 82; J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Zondervan, 1981), p. 199.

¹⁶ G. Braumann in *NIDNTT*, 3:711-2.

¹⁷ Robert Singer has convincingly argued from the work of Edward Greswell (1837) that the first announcement of the cross at Caesarea Philippi occurred about two months before His passion and thus this context must be only a few weeks from the violence of the cross, as Mel Gibson’s *Passion* film reminds us.

¹⁸ BAG, p. 636 (also in BDAG, p. 784).

referring to the diverse people who are hostile to the kingdom—the Jewish leaders, Herod, Pilate, and shortly, Judas Iscariot. The problem is that Luke did not supply a noun, so this might seem to be a pronominal usage of *pas*, for which we have no such established usage like that which is well supported above for the adjective. The solution is probably that the noun ‘people’ is implied, and we can understand *pas* as an adjective modifying it. Admittedly, Luke has given us a unique usage here, but this seems to be the most cogent solution.

In conclusion, the evidence is substantial that *both* Matthew 11:12 and Luke 16:16 should be translated in a hostile sense. The clear linguistic data and the context of the Matthean passage demand a hostile rendering of both clauses, as the TNIV committee has concluded in reversing the NIV. The hostile use of *eis* elsewhere in Luke and ancient sources and the context of anticipation and even multiple predictions of His crucifixion weigh heavily in seeing both John the Baptizer and the Lord Himself as the objects of hostility in both passages. Thus we suggest: “All kinds of people are inflicting violence against it.” If only translators would take the time to check out the context of the other twelve hostile usages of *eis* in Luke’s writings, it would be a giant step forward! Would that future translators and revision committees would consign, “Everyone is forcing his way into it [the kingdom],” to the scrapheap of absurd renderings!